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FM REO HILLAH

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RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0645

INFO RUEHBC/REO BASRAH PRIORITY 0017

RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

RUEHIHL/REO HILLAH 0696

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TAGS: PGOV KISL KDEM I2

SUBJECT: IRANIAN FM MOTTAKI AND AYATOLLAH SISTANI DISCUSS US-IRAN
R=?ISO-8859-1?Q?ELATIONSHIP_AND_IRAN'S_ROLE_I_N_IRAQ

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶11. (U) This is a SET Najaf cable.

¶12. (S) Summary: On May 27, Iranian Foreign Minister (FM) Manouchehr Mottaki visited local officials and members of the religious community in Najaf. Mottaki's visit began at one of Shia Islam's most holy sites, the Imam Ali Shrine. He visited Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani and sought his guidance on a wide range of issues. Sistani told Mottaki that Iran should stay neutral and not interfere in Iraqi internal affairs. He declined to offer his views on U.S./Iranian bilateral issues, saying that the two nations should solve their problems off of Iraqi soil. Mottaki informed Sistani that Iran intended to open a consulate in Basra. End Summary. End summary.

¶13. (S//NOFORN) According to a reliable local source with direct knowledge of the meeting, Iranian FM Mottaki met May 27 with Ayatollah Al-Sistani at the cleric's home in Najaf. Mottaki was accompanied by Najaf Governor Asaad Al-Taee and Deputy Governor Hassan Abtan, both of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). Mottaki passed along greetings from the Ayatollahs who compose the Hawza in Iran. He went on to extend an invitation to Sistani to visit Iran.

¶14. (S) The two men discussed the role Iran should play in Iraq's future. Sistani told Mottaki that Iran should be helping to stabilize the security situation in Iraq and that Iraq's neighbor should be a "partner in securing the shared border." The job of Iran in Iraq's affairs is to "not interfere in Iraqi internal affairs and stay neutral," the Ayatollah reminded the Foreign Minister. Sistani added that Iran had an obligation to help Iraqi refugees living in the camps at the Iran-Iraq border.

¶15. (S) The Iranian FM noted that Iran had supported the government of Iraq in assisting with public services in Najaf and that they will continue that support. He allowed that Iran would like to increase its official diplomatic representation in Iraq. Mottaki told the Ayatollah of Iran's plan to open a new consulate in Basrah.

¶16. (S) Mottaki asked for Sistani's guidance regarding possible negotiations between the United States and Iran. Without expressing an opinion regarding the problems, Sistani made it clear that the situation between the U.S. and Iran was not an Iraqi problem. He asserted that "the two nations must solve their problems off of Iraq's soil."

¶17. (S) Comment: Sistani's refusal to offer advice regarding Iran's relationship with the U.S. is in line with his stance

that the Hawza in Najaf should not participate in politics. He was quite clear with Mottaki, however, regarding Iran's activities in Iraq. Without noting Iran's apparent support for violent activity, he let the Foreign Minister know that the Najaf Hawza was not pleased. In the end, this visit was perfunctory and it seems unlikely that the private words of Ayatollah Al-Sistani will have a public impact. The more Sistani recedes from public life, the stronger the hand of political groups such as SCIRI and the followers of Moqtada Al-Sadr to claim to speak on Sistani's behalf regarding the guidance his Hawza in Najaf has for Iraq's Shi'a Muslims. End comment.

MEURS